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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the strength of the relationship between syllabication ability and reading comprehension. Pre- and posttests using the syllabication and comprehension subtests of the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Tests were administered to 275 middle school children involved in corrective and developmental reading programs. The results of the study indicate that there is a slight correlation (.13) between gain in syllabication ability and gain in reading comprehension, but it is suggested that it may not be great enough to justify teaching syllabication rules in an attempt to improve reading comprehension. It is recommended that experimental studies be conducted to determine if instruction in syllabication improves word recognition ability and/or vocabulary. (LL)

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A Study of the Relationship Between Syllabication Ability and Reading Comprehension

Is it necessary for teachers to spend time instructing students in syllabication generalizations? Does knowledge of these rules necessarily lead to improvement in reading comprehension?

Johnson and Merryman (1971) have defined a syllable as

> "essentially a group of phonemes, consisting of a vowel or a continuant, alone or in a combination with a consonant or consonants. The syllable is a unit of sounds--not meaning, phonological and graphical boundaries...syllabication is the ability to break words into syllables." (p.267)

Related research has been concerned with teaching syllabication rules for decoding purposes, but little has been done regarding the relationship between syllabication and reading comprehension.

Johnson and Merryman (1971) state that the essential purpose of instruction in phonics and syllabication is to help children pronounce words and that there is a reasonably good chance that if a child can be helped to pronounce a word, he will recognize it and understand it. Dorothy Seymour (1973), however, feels that syllabication is not directed at pronunciation of completely new words, but at recognition of words that are already in the child's understanding vocabulary. Spache (1973) says that "early training in syllabication generalization...aids successful word recognition..." (p. 489)

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Groff (1971) states that "the teaching of generalization is not worth the effort because most of them are only spelling conventions, and besides, the syllable is almost indefinable." (pp. 107-17) Wardhaugh (1966) attacks syllabication rules as having almost nothing to do with the actual patterns of English and having hardly any application beyond the typesetter's domain. (pp. 758-8)

Because of the conflicting opinions concerning the usefulness of syllabication ability, the authors felt it important to determine the strength of relationship between syllabication ability and comprehension. Thus, it was the purpose of this study to answer the research question: What is the relationship between gain in syllabication ability and gain in reading comprehension? The authors felt that proportional gains in both skills would "imply" that a gain in syllabication might bring about a gain in comprehension. The existence of a strong relationship between syllabication and comprehension gain scores would be a first step before experimentally determining whether instruction in syllabication improves comprehension.

The syllabication and comprehension subtests of the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test, Level II, Forms W & X were administered to 275 corrective and developmental reading students attending East Middle School in Aurora, Colorado. Aurora is basically a white, middle-class suburb of Denver. Form W was used for the pre-test in the fall of 1974 and Form X was used for the post-test in May, 1975. Gain scores for each student were then calculated in syllabication and comprehension.

A Pearson Correlation Coefficient was computed between the pairs of gain scores to determine if the increase in comprehension ability correlated positively with an increase in syllabication knowledge. That correlation was .13. Although significant ($p. < .05$), this correlation is quite low. In effect, it indicates that 2% of the variance in comprehension gain is predictable by gain in syllabication. Interpreted in a broader context, this low correlation implies that gain in syllabication ability is not strongly related to gain in comprehension. Even if syllabication and comprehension have a cause-effect relationship (e.g. syllabication gain causes comprehension gain), the benefits in terms of increased comprehension ability would seem to be too small to justify the teaching of syllabication.

Thus, the results of this study indicate that there is a slight correlation between gain in syllabication ability and gain in reading comprehension. However, the correlation is so slight that there appears to be little justification for teaching syllabication rules to improve reading comprehension. The authors feel, however, that the teaching of syllabication rules should not be omitted entirely, since there may be a relationship between syllabication and other areas of reading improvement such as word recognition or vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, it is recommended that experimental studies be conducted to determine if instruction in syllabication improves word recognition ability and/or vocabulary. Because of the results of this study, there appears to be little need to experimentally determine whether instruction in syllabication improves comprehension.

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